

# Message to state Supreme Court: Be bold on education-funding fix

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**A student's school district should not determine her or his opportunity for success in life.**

By [Chris Korsmo](#)

*Special to The Times*

OUR state's founders had a vision. They called education the "paramount duty" of the state and inscribed it into the state constitution.

Thanks to that vision, we live in a state that promises a meaningful education — for each and every child. We believe the pathway to providing that opportunity is a high-quality public-education continuum, from early learning through postsecondary education. That pathway begins with identifying what works and funding it.

In 2009, the League of Education Voters supported the expansion of "basic education" in ESHB 2261, which increased the state's funding of public education for the first time in 30 years. These investments were recommended based on years of research, studies and workgroups. They included full-day kindergarten, class-size reductions in grades K-3, materials, supplies and school-district operating costs.

It then took a court case and a contempt ruling to convince the Legislature to fund this expanded definition.

## **What now for education funding?**

On Monday, the Legislature will submit its education funding progress report to the state Supreme Court. The court is expected to rule on the adequacy of the reforms, which have been significant but incomplete.

In anticipation of the court's action, The Times' Opinion page asked lawmakers, the Washington Education Association and League of Education Voters to share their thinking on what is still needed to create a more equitable system of public education funding. Read their columns at the links below:

**League of Education Voters' Chris Korsmo:** [Message to state Supreme Court: Be bold on education-funding fix](#)

**State Reps. Ross Hunter and Chad Magendanz:** [Buckle up: Levy shake-up needed to fix school funding](#)

**State Sen. David Frockt:** [Where is the grand bargain?](#)

**Washington Education Association's Kim Mead:** [Legislature did not fully fund high-quality education system](#)

Fast forward six years, and our state Legislature, with broad bipartisan support, just invested \$1.3 billion into K-12 education over the next biennium and made unprecedented investments in early-childhood and higher education.

Our state is now on track to reach its 2018 target for fully funding ESHB 2261 and investing in education more comprehensively than at any other time in the state's history.

But for all this unparalleled bipartisan progress, we have two threats that could dismantle our state's commitment to an education continuum: Initiative 1351 and the state's overreliance on local levies.

Though our lawmakers delayed the implementation of I-1351 this session, the unfunded mandate to limit class sizes in grades 4-12, it should be repealed or significantly amended.

With I-1351 on the books, the state must spend roughly \$2 billion every year with no accountability for how that money actually gets used. The state will be unable to fund things like early learning, college readiness or postsecondary access. Also at risk are social services — mental-health funding, child food assistance, along with virtually every state-funded program that helps Washingtonians who need the most assistance.

Like many of Washington's social-service agencies, the League of Education Voters publicly opposed I-1351 last fall.

Despite the Legislature's work, lawmakers did not solve one of the most complex political problems in our state: the overreliance on local levies to fund parts of basic education.

Local levies were intended to fund "extras" — resources or programming not covered under basic education. What these levies allowed the state to do instead was systematically underfund basic education, forcing many districts to supplement the cost with local funds.

This has resulted in an uneven and inequitable amalgamation of student funding and teacher salaries across districts that ultimately denies students their constitutional right to a meaningful education.

The state Supreme Court first ruled the state's overreliance on local levies unconstitutional in the 1970s and reiterated that ruling in *McCleary v. State of Washington*.

Any solution must result in increased opportunity for all students across the state. A student's school district should not determine his or her opportunity for success in life.

The use of local levies to fund basic education has broken Washington's promise to all its children.

We now look to the Supreme Court to continue the work begun by our Legislature this session and renew that promise.

If the Supreme Court withholds judgment on the Legislature's inaction on levies, our state will have let down another generation of children. It's time for the court to be bold, and for us to support its decision.

It is, after all, the state's paramount duty; it's ours, too.

*Chris Korsmo is CEO of the League of Education Voters, a statewide nonprofit working to improve public education in Washington from early learning through postsecondary education.*